



//The Cloud of Unknowing

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Fine Arts in Printmaking in the Department of Printmaking of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

By Evan Mann, 2012

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

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Andrew Raftery  
Professor, Department of Printmaking, Thesis Chair

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Jenn Joy  
Lecturer, Department of Sculpture and Graduate Studies, Thesis Advisor

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Kevin Kalish  
Orthodox Priest and Professor, Thesis Advisor





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//Abstract

"How can the invisible be depicted? How does one picture the inconceivable? How can one draw what is limitless, immeasurable, infinite?"<sup>1</sup>

These timeless questions, proposed by St. John of Damascus in the 8th century, ignite a beckon toward the unknown while shining light upon the limitations of our knowledge. Any act beyond understanding becomes an act of faith. Present in cultural forms such as science, philosophy, religion, and art, these acts of faith become necessary "to attain a distanced, self reflective posture of evaluation that is willing to throw into doubt the status quo in order to seek out a preferred state of existence."<sup>2</sup> Art, by faith, functions to enlighten those who seek this perfect mode of being; I have embraced the term "theosis" to describe this process and goal.<sup>3</sup>

Borrowing again the words of St. John: "visible things are corporeal models which provide a vague understanding of intangible things."<sup>4</sup>

Matter is a portal into the metaphysical, and in "negotiating rapture" one must perceive the physical world as a lens to discern the intangible.<sup>5</sup> I hope for my work to function as an icon into the otherworldly, and through its creation and regard, for the beholder to be taken up into a "cloud of unknowing" a darkness described as an absence of knowing.<sup>6</sup> The worlds I depict and the objects within them are not to be understood; they are non-rational manifestations of that which exists beyond limitations of perception.

I hope to reawaken the wonder of existence, for my work to be imaginative nourishment that feeds the mystery of reality, acting as a vehicle to ascend the peaks of transcendence.

"...The things which are seen were not made of things which are visible." — Hebrews 11:3



//Introduction: Floating in the Void

Anchored to the deep unruffled ocean, I floated in the silence of drifting fog somewhere in the Gulf of Alaska. Resting my fishing rod on the edge of the boat, I searched through the haze for a reference point, a sliver of land or another boat, but I found only water fading into ambiguity. My imagination composed random scenarios of otherworldly creatures emerging from the haze. These reveries caused me to wonder what realities dwelled beyond the sphere of my perceptions and to ask what mysteries hid in the crevasses of existence.

My attention returned to the fishing rod; something was nibbling on the bait. The reel buzzed to life as I set the hook. Within minutes, the creature from the abyss flopped into the aluminum boat, curling at my feet with heaving gills. After removing the hook, its muscle contractions slowed to stillness and wild eyes became inert. The salmon was dying; I shuddered at the sacrifice I justified. Aligning my head towards the sky, I tried to understand death: was it merely the end of life or was it a process of transfer? According to physics, energy never disappears, but transforms from one mode into another; where did the living component of the salmon vanish to?

Looking again at the lifeless body, I noticed the mirrored surface of the fish's eye contained my reflection, along with the veiled cosmos and the boat interior. With an unusual union, the micro contained the macro in a raw, real, and organic reminder of mortality.

The mysteries that dwell beyond reason invoke awe, that firsthand experience of reality slipping through the fingers of the mind. My work begins here, upon the wrinkle that transforms concrete understanding into a perplexing aura of mystery: "The Cloud of Unknowing." I have borrowed this title from a book written by an anonymous Christian monk in the 14th century. The book functions to direct the inclined reader in contemplative prayer. The author suggests that one must push down all physical associations into a "cloud of forgetting" in order to behold the Divine, who cannot be circumscribed by human knowledge. This contemplation "rests entirely in this darkness (of the mind) and in this cloud of unknowing with a loving stirring and a blind attention only to the bare existence of God Himself."<sup>7</sup>

"For what is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."  
—James 4:14





//Emerging and Immersing

I hit the record button and began the journey into the sea while Deborah remained on the beach with the camera. She gave me verbal directions to keep me in the frame, “turn left... go straight... turn right...” As I ventured further, the waves washed out her guiding voice. The costume was disorienting, lacking both eye slits and peripheral vision, so my course wandered. Water licked my chin.

By now I was shoulder deep in the sea, attempting to submerge myself, but the wet-suit and costume were too buoyant. This was a problem I had not anticipated. My initial plan was to emerge from the water and walk toward the camera, but because this was not possible, I had to settle with the less epic version. I bobbed around in the tides for a bit and made my way towards the beach. Deborah’s voice returned again, guiding my path. The waterlogged costume slowed my movements and became increasingly heavy as I progressed towards dry land. By now, we had gathered the attention of more than just a few casual onlookers.

The police were waiting for me. Apparently a concerned citizen thought it unusual to cover one’s own body with household materials, and in the twilight, walk into the icy shadows of the sea. The blustery weather brought no consolation, for it had snowed the previous day. What I intended as poetry, someone else perceived to be a tragic one-way journey into the ocean. I struggled to remove the saturated costume and transfer it into an oversized trash bag.

With the soggy whiteness encapsulated, we made our way to the parking lot, where the idling police cars waited patiently. I needed only to mention “RISD” and “school project” for the officers to fully realize the innocence of the situation. They said I had been described as a “mentally disturbed person attempting suicide” and suggested that next time I should disclose my intentions beforehand to avoid confusion. The thought of calling the police before making art had never occurred to me. After giving them my regrets for the miscommunication, we moved on.

This experience enriched the content of the project, for it revealed the presence of death in a scene that I perceived as life, thus painting truthfully the predicament of existence. The opening scene of Real Ethereal represents creation and the emergence of birth. It is the cleansing waters of baptism that purify the soul, the reclamation

of life from the frigid waters of death, and the introduction of a profound mystery that continually nudges us along the winding path we follow. In regards to the final scene, it is the completion of reality and the satiated cycle of life. In order for something to live, something needs to die. Death gives life.<sup>8</sup>

“And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last.” —Mark 15:37



Theosis is a Greek term to describe a process of divinization, or perfect union with God. St. Maximos the Confessor articulates theosis as “becoming by grace what God is by nature.”<sup>9</sup> This process is not to be confused with apotheosis, which is the rising of an individual to a godlike stature, thus becoming an equal with God.<sup>10</sup> To distinguish the two, theosis is a grafting into the branch of an existing tree, the tree of life, while apotheosis is becoming an entirely independent tree.<sup>11</sup> The process of theosis is composed of three stages: katharsis, theoria, and theosis. Katharsis is synonymous with purification, the purging of evil and the “passions,” in a continual process of repentance.<sup>12</sup> Theoria (“theory” is the English derivative) is Greek for contemplation, or illumination, and refers to the act of understanding through experience, which is accomplished through the “nous,” or the “eye of the soul.”<sup>13</sup> It is beholding and experiencing of God through contemplative prayer. Both katharsis and theoria must be diligently practiced before one enters into theosis, the final and highest goal. For most, this occurs at the end of earthly life. Theosis is Heaven: an uncompromised relationship with the Creator.<sup>14</sup>

How theosis works exactly is unknown, its essence is one that cannot be set into words. It must be experienced. I am neither a philosopher nor theologian, thus establishing my inability and unworthiness to write about the subject, but I have faithfully established the purpose of my life in this process.<sup>15</sup> As a result, theosis has become a central concept in my art practice. I believe the stem of every work is rooted in this mystery. Art making is a meditative catalyst for prayer and a means to process the themes and systems associated with theosis. Water, rock, clay, the body, hygienic materials, ascension, and the color white are among the symbols that surround theosis. katharsis, theoria, and theosis become more apparent as I venture deeper into my art practice.

Katharsis reveals itself most commonly through eliminating the “the rainbow chaos of life,”<sup>16</sup> so all that remains is the minimality of whiteness. Color is not evil, but it becomes unnecessary for one who seeks to remove the clutter that causes one to stumble. At the least, color is an unwanted distraction, which is still perilous because distractions pull the eye away from the goal. Katharsis is linked to the waters of baptism, from the rinsing of brushes to creatures emerging from the ocean. Weeping for one's sins acts as a subsequent baptism, for tears

of repentance are a physical manifestation of an introspective purging. The rhythmic entering and exiting in the looping video, [Relationship](#), speaks directly to this internal transformation. The work of katharsis does not rest.

Theoria, the act of beholding the Divine through the nous, is also a prevalent theme in my art practice. I perceive my work as depictions of the nous’ metaphysical visions, not as illustrations of God, who is formless and uncontainable, but rather as the brief flashes of infinite illumination experienced during the flutter of Divine interaction. It is impossible to objectively depict this mystery, so I take great liberties to imagine it physically. These imaginings give birth to the formal content of my work.

Theosis. How can I describe this mystery in terms of my work? Let us consider a young man who has grown up his entire life sheltered in a windowless cell. He is content in his ignorance of the external world, but has an innate longing for a wholeness of life he cannot describe. One day, and without notice, this young man is teleported to all the wonderful, exotic and active places on the earth: the coral reefs, deep jungles, and big cities. In this moment he tastes every healthy and delectable flavor while his ears take in the most soothing and inspiring musical sounds. He is the recipient of every act of love humanity has accomplished, from the joyful squeeze of grandmother to the sensuous embrace of a monogamous lover. He is exposed to all of these things in the rapidity of a lighting bolt, yet nearly a lifetime passes in his eyes. The moment is so riveting that he can desire nothing more than to reside permanently in this fantastical world, and so he devotes his life to pursuing it.<sup>17</sup> The young man’s journey touches on a moment of theosis, and this moment is the driving force of my work.

“...You may be partakers of the divine nature...” — 2 peter 1:4



## //On The Cloud of Unknowing

"The Cloud of Unknowing" is a classic medieval masterpiece, written by an anonymous monk in the fourteenth century. I find this work to aptly describe and encompass the core of my interests. The writing is directed to a pupil who is learning the contemplative life, the work of *theoria* on the path of theosis. The 'cloud of unknowing' describes an immaterial place where the soul beholds God, who transcends knowledge. For one to enter the cloud, the intellectual faculty must be restrained as thrusts of love and humble prayer are laboriously directed towards the essence of God. Because God is forever beyond the grasp of knowledge, it is through the work of love that one is able to enter the Divine presence. "For He can well be loved, but he cannot be thought. By love he can be grasped and held, but by thought neither grasped nor held."<sup>18</sup> Surpassing intellectual and physical limitations, love (being the language of Divine grace) becomes the proper vehicle for the soul to enter into the presence of God.

This labor is not a rejection or disowning of knowledge, or even anything bodily. Both the mind and body are necessary for participation in the "active life" (deeds of service) and they join the soul to compose a complete person.<sup>19</sup> The soul is "the thing that looks out your eyeballs,"<sup>20</sup> who is contained in the body, and reasons through the mind. In the work of contemplation, the mind and body must submit to the soul, for they have nothing to offer in this intangible labor. To enter into the cloud of unknowing is an adventure which only the soul can embark. The mind and body must refrain, waiting in anticipation for the news of a successful journey into the unknown.

Although love and God both surpass reasonable explanation, they can be individually felt and experienced through the nous. It is the personal nature of these mysteries that hold my attention to faithfully pursue the cloud of unknowing. But in the context of my work, I have expanded this concept to represent all mysteries beyond our present knowledge, from the scientific inquiries of fundamental matter, the physical universe, and the nature of light, to the theological and philosophical mysteries of creation, the incarnation, and eschatology. If all knowledge is equal to the volume of the ocean, I imagine the capacity of humanity's combined knowledge could easily be enclosed within a soda bottle. As for the remaining uncontainable volumes, we can only wonder:

"God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." —1 John 4:16









Religious art functions to proselytize, affirm dogma, and to incline the heart of a worshipper to draw near to God. It is not my intention for my work to function as religious art, rather, my art practice functions to inform my religion. It is a means for me to seek knowledge, grapple with my faith, and initiate the exploration and practice of theological concepts. Art making is a form of personal journaling, but I do hope to bring my explorations into the postmodernist conversation, not to convert the masses (let it be known: I struggle enough with my own heart's conversion), but to generate opportunities for fruitful conversation and empathy. Faith and religion are relevant and worthy of discussion, for we all participate in acts of faith and the cultural influence of religion is powerful, although not always in the most positive ways.

Historically, religion has been manipulated to gain power and wealth, many argue that it was invented for this purpose. It is a great loss to judge the reality of something based upon those who most poorly represent it. Imagine the essence of a religion to be the sole light source in a room; those in the room all claim the light source as their religion. Some will reflect it better than others, making it unreasonable to judge the essence of the light based upon those who dimly, if at all, reflect it. Within the same room will be Saints, some nearly as bright as the light itself, while in the shadows there will lurk those whose surface is so tarnished they will be not be visible.<sup>21</sup> Not everyone adequately reflects what they claim, and often it is these who speak the loudest. This applies to any faith, system of thought, or worldview.

Both art and religion are systems that function to seek the possibilities beyond the limits of our mental, spiritual, and bodily spheres. Regardless of the system, our collective search for Truth (including those who believe there is no Truth, for paradoxically, this idea becomes a Truth in its own right) requires degrees of faith, and such is an activity that transcends divided worldviews. Atheists, creationists, and artists alike hold faith in systems that cannot be proven, yet they arrive at unbending conclusions. It is futile to prove or disprove something held in faith, yet it seems the latter is dismissed as naïve.<sup>22</sup> Frieze Magazine published an entire issue that explored religion verses spirituality in contemporary art. In the introduction, Dan Fox speaks to my point when he says "religious conviction is taken to be a sign of intellectual weakness, and yet meaning in art is itself often a question of belief."<sup>23</sup>

Art has placed me in the presence of the most authentic people, few who share my convictions, but many who exercise a faith. These influential relationships have established a platform for faith-enriching conversations, allowing opportunities to understand others while challenging me to further investigate the truth I seek and practice. The commingling of art and religion is indispensable, for both are exercises of faith and exist to make thrusts toward boundaries of uncertainty. When properly joined, the duo become a powerful mechanism to ascend the heights of human potential.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." — John 20:29





//White

It is nature's snowy blanket of stillness that enables one to float down mountainsides, drawing soundless arcs that navigate the rhythmic passing of trees through unending forest. White is silence.

It is the chalky powder that increases friction for the flesh of hands to climb crags of rock. White is a means of ascension.

It is the force of lighting that coursed through my body when suspended two thousand feet above, engulfed by hail and fog. White is humbling.

It is the totality of color in the light spectrum and the absence of color in the reflected spectrum. White is everything and it is nothing.

It is the freshly primed canvas, the sheet of Rives BFK, the dwelling place for unhindered mark making. White is infinite possibility.

It is Herman Melville's whale; Kenya Hara's design concept; Tara Donovan's bio-morphing articulations; the Beatles' best selling album. White is relevant.

It is the dress my wife wore on our wedding day. White is purity.

It is the veil of mystery, that cloud which causes comprehension to dissolve. White is the unknown.

It is the light that provoked the disciples into a trembling decent towards the ground, forcing them to seek comfort in the pebbles that imbedded themselves into their skin.<sup>24</sup> White is fear and trembling.

White is beyond 'white'.

"There He was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them." — Mark 9:2-3









The Last Supper concluded my first year at RISD; the second year grads were graduating and as a group, we had not yet shared a meal together. Video was becoming a dominant medium in my work, and I sought to expand compositions from small-scale tabletop animations to a live-action, human scale. I also wanted my work to be experienced physically, in real space and time, as an immersive environment for the beholder to become a living gesture, as a toucher, a smeller, and a taster. These visions merged in The Last Supper, a work that combines "Relational Aesthetics" and Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" within installation and a video set.

French critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics" in the late 1990's to describe "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."<sup>25</sup> He theorized that the role of art was to be a practical reality rather than a static representation of reality. Bourriaud is suggesting that we take down the painting of people eating dinner together and replace it with a real table, covered with real food and invite real people to eat together in a real space. Similar to a "Happening" the entirety of a relational piece exists only in the moment. Rirkrit Tiravanija's installations of the early 1990's, which involved cooking meals for gallery-goers, rest under the genre of Relational Aesthetics.

In a "Happening" a group of people come together and are given tasks or instructions to follow during a specific duration of time; the work of art is whatever "happens" between two the two points of time. The outcome of the work remains unknown to the artist, participants, and viewers. A Happening cannot be repeated, as it submits to elements of spontaneity and improvisation, but they are documented in the form of writings, photographs and videos, which are not considered as art in themselves, but serve solely as documents of the artwork. Allan Kaprow is the father of Happenings, which he developed and practiced in the late 1950's and 1960's. Happenings are considered to be a thing of antiquity, marking the birth of performance art, but I hope to employ the term for this piece.

As my colleagues gathered in the foyer of the space, "there was given to each of them a white robe."<sup>26</sup> I gave a brief introduction to the work and dismissed them to enter into the space, then "a cloud appeared and covered them, and they

were afraid as they entered the cloud."<sup>27</sup> A creatures whose "face had the appearance of lightning"<sup>28</sup> was "sitting on the cloud" and "was one like a son of man."<sup>29</sup> My colleagues explored the space, running their fingers and eyes through the environment. Then a circular table descended from the ceiling and rested upon three pillars. Each person circled around the table until they found the place with their name upon it; no place was greater or lesser than another, for they were "equal as brothers and sisters."<sup>30</sup> Then I brought them food, "bread rained from heaven,"<sup>31</sup> and "they shared a meal together as friends."<sup>32</sup>

"I am the bread of life." — John 6:48











//A Paradox

There is within me a rhythmic struggle, an internal 'good' waging war with what I understand to be an external 'evil.' I desire the good, yet I frequently choose the evil. For instance, I aspire to love all people without condition, yet I seem to find an excuse to lower the standards of my love. I see someone's faults and almost unwillingly place a wedge of judgment that injures my love towards them. I desire so badly to be blind to the faults of others, that my love would pour without end to pursue the best interests of those within my community and that my every thought was to someone else's benefit.<sup>33</sup> Yet sadly, this is not the case. I am a hypocrite, a sinner, and a mutineer on my own boat of convictions. St. Paul says it well: "I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate."<sup>34</sup>

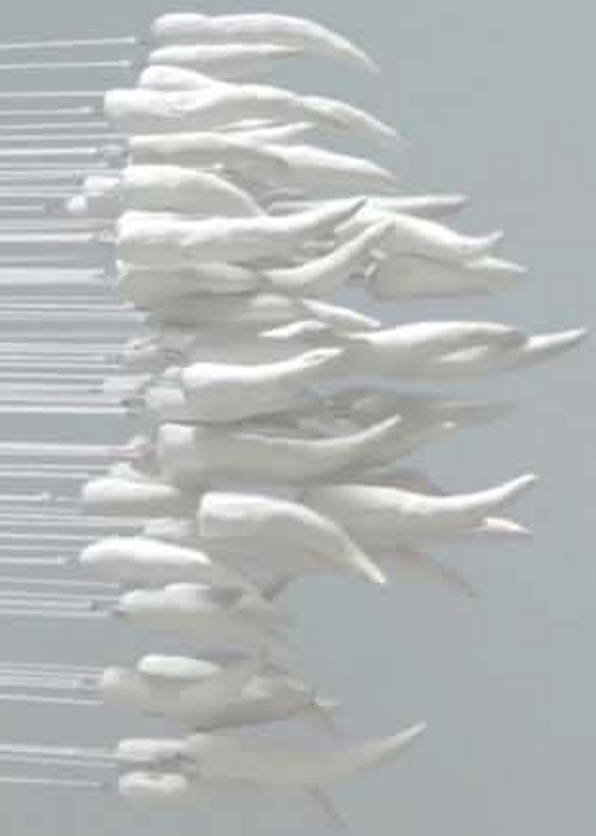
At times I am overwhelmed with joy and love for people, while in other moments, my thoughts will run with wild abandon towards selfish gains and vainglory. In wading through the cesspool of my egocentrism, I neglect my duty to love. When I repent from these terrible thoughts and judgments, my heart becomes softened and burns anew with zealous love; relationships draw nearer. But as time passes, a thought slips here and there, causing my heart to harden with love hindering callousness; relationships become distant. The cyclical nature of this battle reveals more than anything my need for mercy.

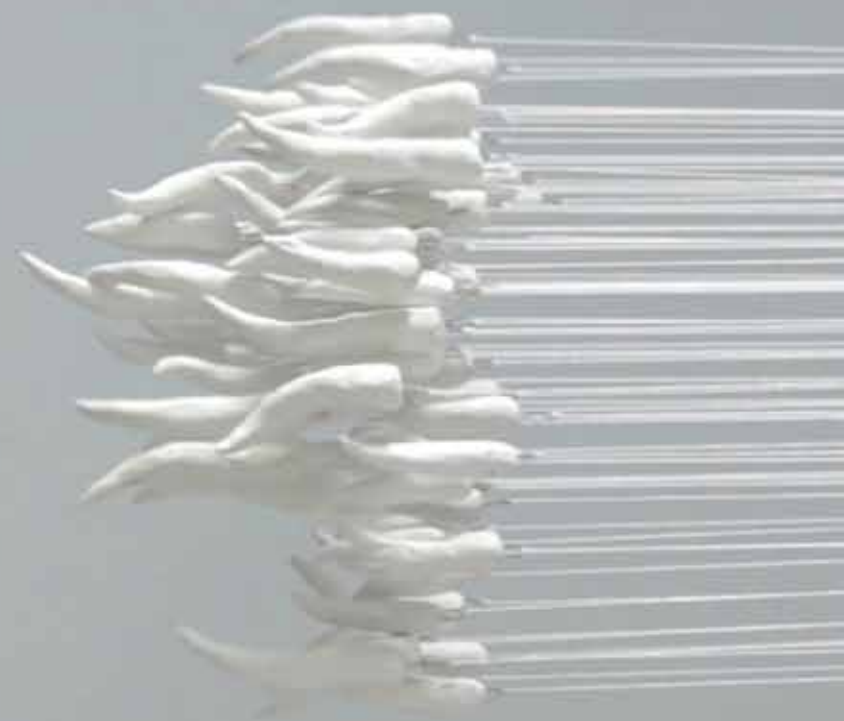
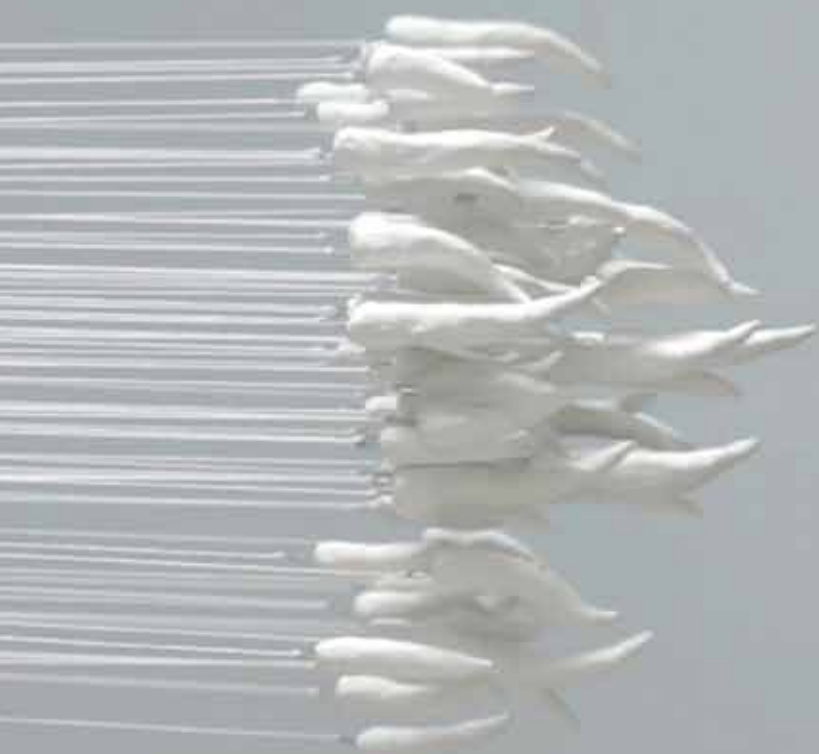
The video [Relationship](#) has become a signifier for this continuous and internal struggle of engaging and withdrawing. To overcome this battle requires unceasing introspective analysis (for the root of conceit is difficult to remove), thus [Relationship](#) loops indefinitely.

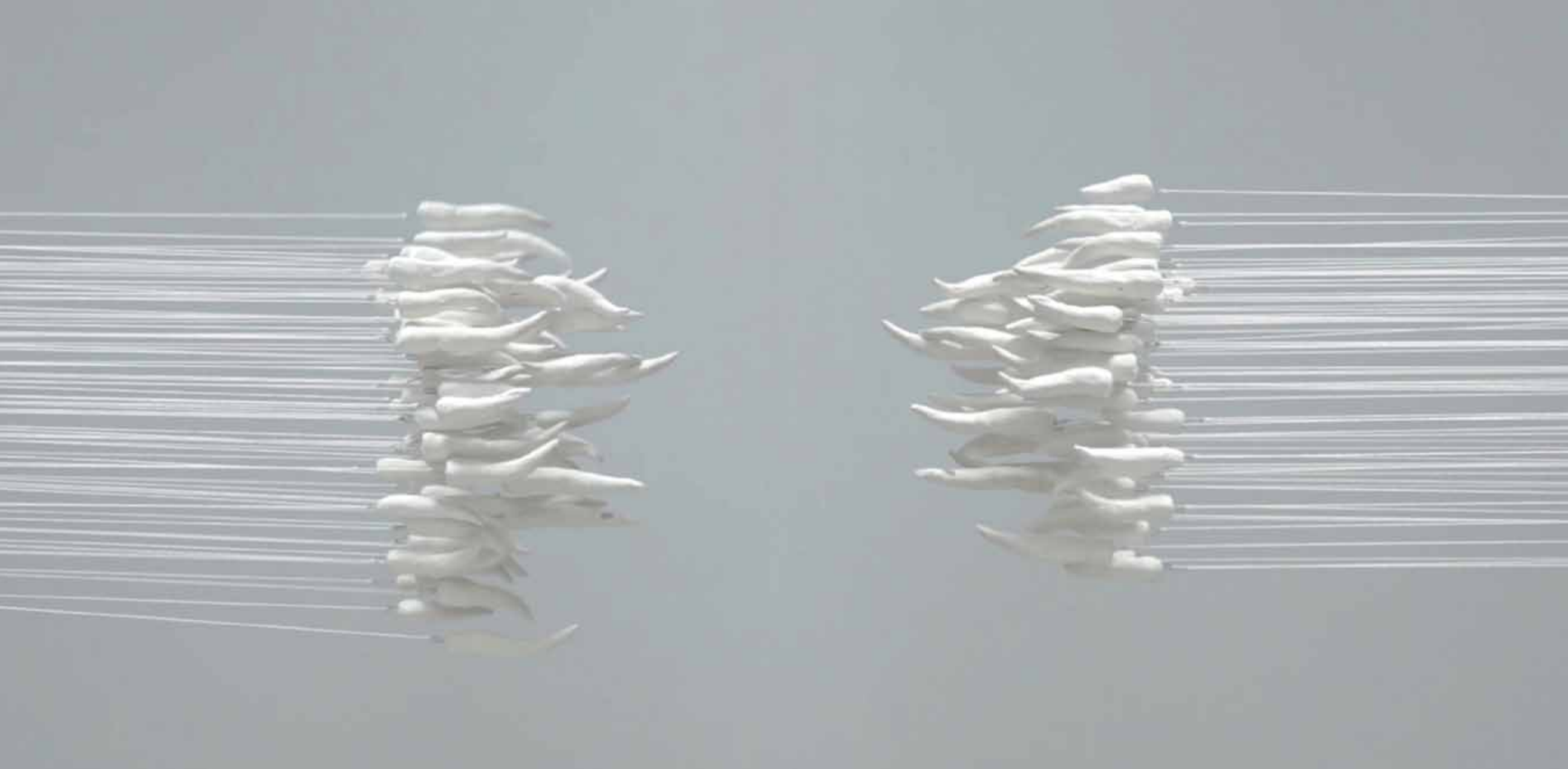
"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." — Philippians 2:3-4













## //Behold: A New Creation

When the last seam is fixed and hem sewn, the pieces are carefully assembled upon my body. Every strap and button is attached to its counterpart. A creature is born and stands for the first time amongst the scraps of its own creation. Somewhere on the floor a hot glue gun drips. The creature leaves the room, almost instinctually, making its way outside. It is alive.

Stepping outside onto the sidewalk, it immediately gains attention, becoming the object of countless camera phones and feeling fingers. People take hold of its hands and ask questions; it plays along in silence. The creature's presence transforms the public space, generating a hype usually reserved for Justin Bieber.... I love testing out new costumes.

"I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life." — Ezekiel 37:5





## //Art, Mud, and the Hubble Space Telescope

The purity and muddiness of life are intertwined. Jesus spat in the dirt to make a healing balm of mud that turned blindness into sight.<sup>35</sup> He used the resources at hand to open blind eyes. Not unlike this miracle, image making combines common materials to illumine the inclined viewer. The image functions to advance our knowledge, and enlighten our understanding. It is especially useful in making the invisible manifest so that we are able to construct visual analogies. The Hubble Space Telescope sends images to us as icons of the cosmos. When one is beholding these images, they are able to construct in their mind an understanding of vast universal spaces. Of course it is understood that the photograph is not the real cosmos, but merely a material depiction of it. In this way, all matter is capable of becoming an icon of otherwise intangible spaces and ethereal concepts, allowing our minds to grapple with immeasurable spans of time, incomprehensible proportions, and invisible realities.

Because it is difficult for us to elevate our thoughts to comprehend higher things, it becomes a great advantage to utilize common materials to represent these concepts. In giving form to the formless, higher things become more tangible and increase our admiration of their mystery. Otherwise, how can one admire something they are not aware of? Think of the multitude of generations that never witnessed the cosmos through the Hubble technology. Those galaxies and nebulae remained hidden for millennia until the Hubble's eye bore witness to them. Thirteen centuries ago, St. John of Damascus wrote a timeless piece on the function of images:

"All images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden. For example, man does not have immediate knowledge of invisible things, since the soul is veiled by the body. Nor can man have immediate knowledge of things which are distant from each other or separated by place, because he himself is circumscribed by place and time. Therefore the image was devised that he might advance in knowledge, and that secret things might be revealed and made perceptible. Therefore, images are a source of profit, help and salvation for all, since they make things so obviously manifest, enabling us to perceive hidden things."<sup>36</sup>

The art making process, especially the research and creation, functions as a healing balm to open the eyes of my understanding, so that I am able to apprehend and appreciate the mysteries of the beyond. Through the commingling of common

materials, such as q-tips, cotton balls, shaving cream, wax, clay, cups, and paper, I form windows into the otherworldly. These materials become transformed, rising above their functional substance to become vehicles for transcendence. Thus the image becomes a powerful mechanism with the potential to transform not only perspectives, but also the very purpose for existence.

"So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." — Genesis 1:27









Descartes theorized the human duality, suggesting that the body is a machine, bound to the laws of physics, with material properties of motion and extension. This machine was controlled by a nonmaterial mind, or soul, that was not confined to physical laws. He proposed that these two entities were connected at the pineal gland, what he called "the seat of the soul."<sup>37</sup> A few centuries later in 1907, a doctor by the name of Duncan MacDougall sought to prove the existence of the soul. MacDougall tried to measure the change in weight as the soul departed the body by placing dying people upon scales; he decided the soul to weigh on average around three quarters of an ounce, or about 21 grams.<sup>38</sup>

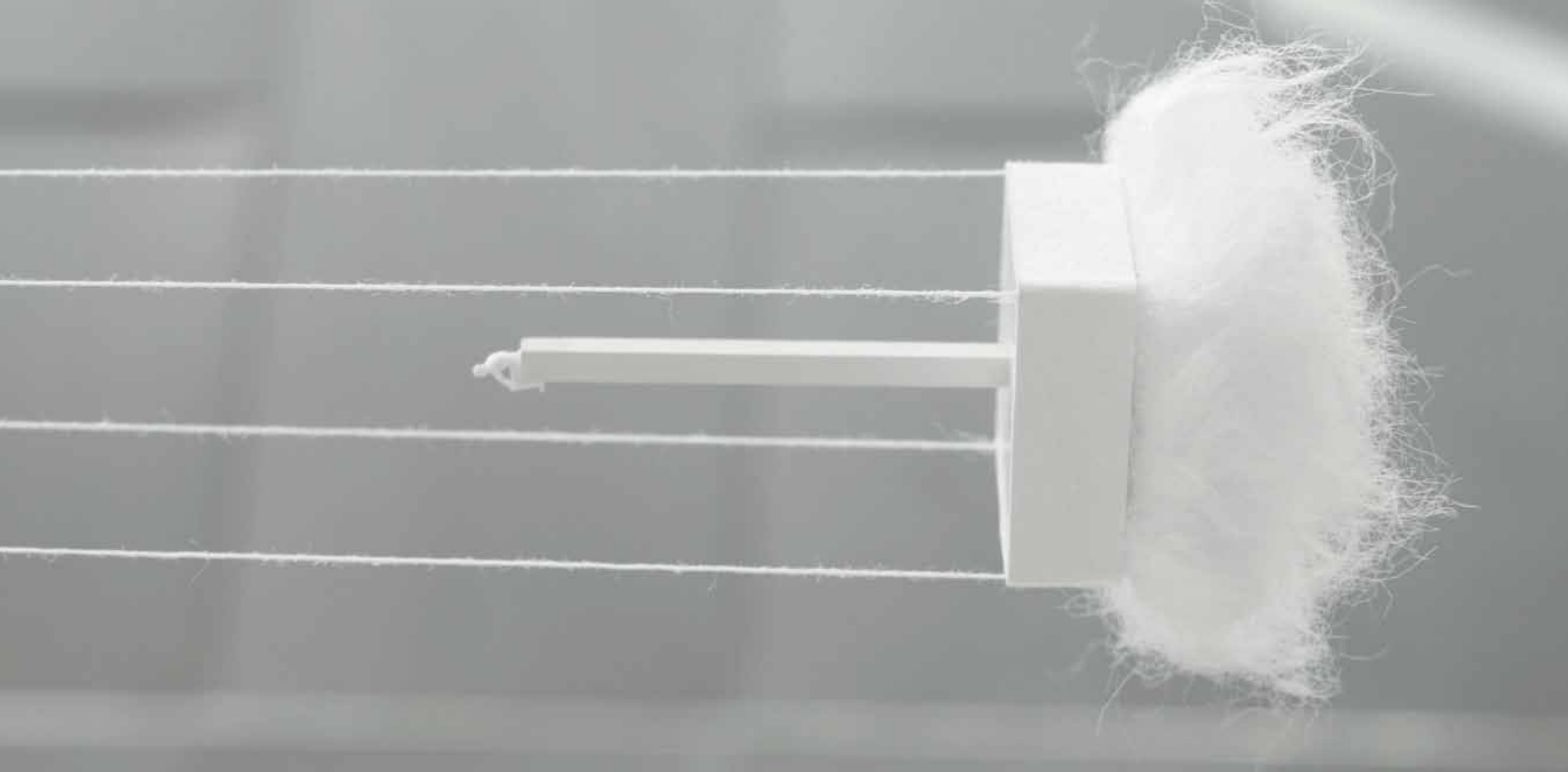
The existence of the physical world, which clearly sprawls out before us, is unquestionable, but when it comes to the existence of a soul, or any nonmaterial entity, skepticism arises due to a lack of physical evidence. We understand the world through seeing, tasting, and touching, which allows us to draw conclusions, but these sensory tools are not necessarily designed to perceive every level of existence. There remain mysteries beyond the limitations of our senses, and it requires other technologies to comprehend these unknown expanses. Telescopes allow us to see further than the naked eye; submarines enable us to explore otherwise bodily harming depths; I argue that faith acts as another tool to grapple with untouchable realities.

"I think therefore I am."<sup>39</sup> Is this not a faith in our cognitive faculties? Do we question, daily, the existence of our own being? My faith in the soul is not unlike my eyes seeing my body; to accept that people have a soul is to believe that our existence goes beyond the confines of this physical world, and that death is not an end, but a transition from one place to another. To deny the existence of the soul is to hold a faith that we are only what we see, that our complexity ends with our own comprehension. Thus we are defining ourselves based upon our limitations; this is a faith I cannot muster.

I suggest, without proof, that there exists within us beings that are beyond our comprehension, that inside of you and I dwells an unseen creature that is far superior to the flesh of our own bodies. In this vein, I have created [A Modest Materialization of the Human Duality](#), which places the physical body and the invisible inner being in a shared space. I believe this installation to be a humble juxtaposition; perhaps even the

volume of the universe would not suffice to contain the significance of the human soul. Regardless of the scale, my hope is for this piece to challenge our self-perception, especially in light of the temporal and fleeting world we inhabit.

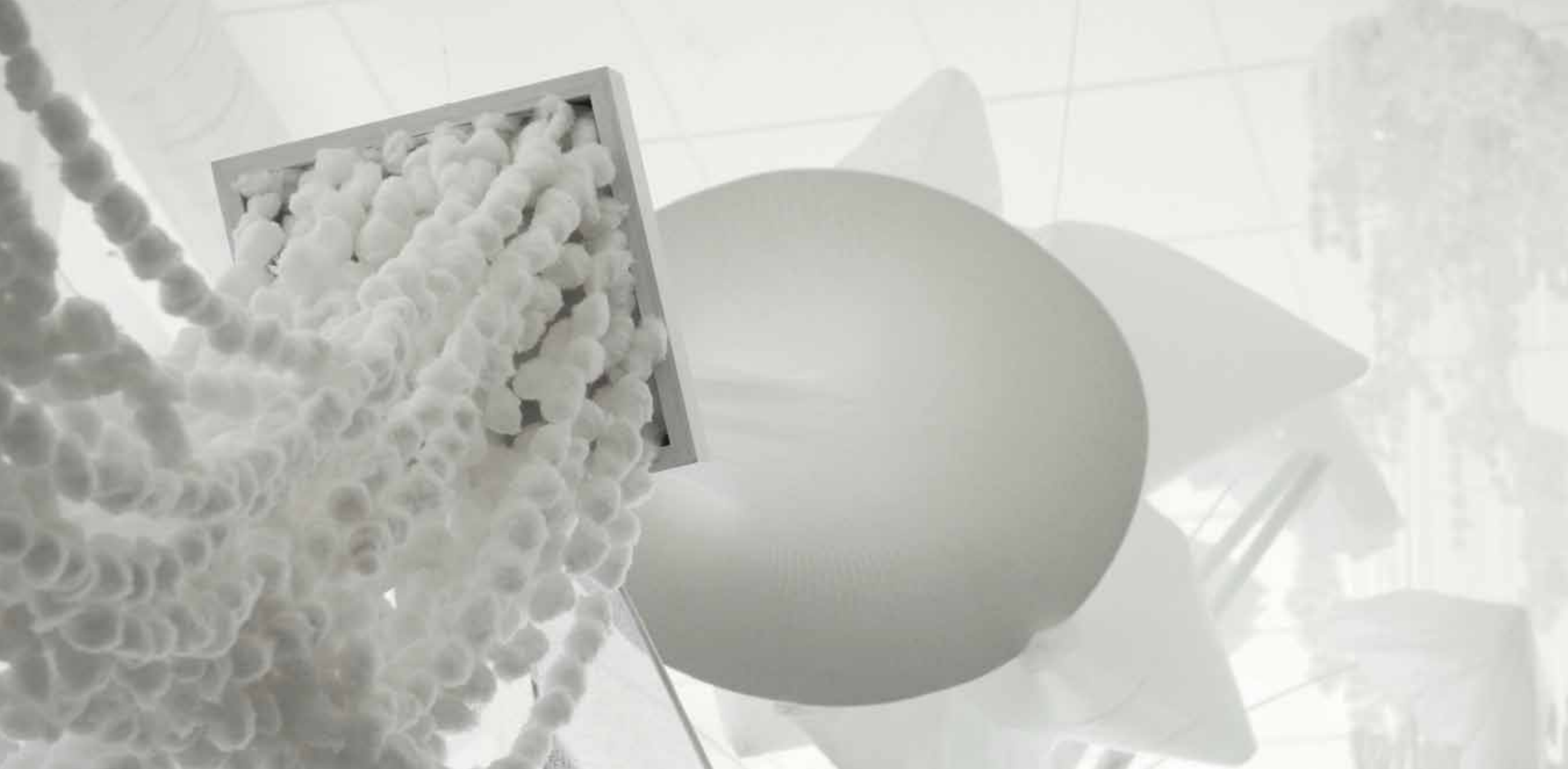
"Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." —1 Corinthians 15:50-52











The philosophy of my work is borrowed from Eastern Orthodox iconography. In the Church, icons are perceived, by faith, as windows into other worlds. They are the meeting place between the earth and the heavenly spheres. Icons are not memorials of dead saints or ancient events, rather they are of people and phenomena that are living and active. For instance, the icon of the resurrection is of an event that is perpetually occurring, because God is not bound by time, thus eternally activating Christ's power over death. So too, the saints are alive in Christ, for God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."<sup>40</sup> The saints are referred to as a "great cloud of witnesses" that surrounds us, for they are present and active in our lives.<sup>41</sup> All people are perceived as icons of Christ, for people are made in God's image. In this light, the reverential kissing of an icon, or a fellow parishioner, is the kissing of Christ Himself, who lives in those who believe.<sup>42</sup>

During liturgy, the faithful ascend to a heavenly dimension, in worship and prayer, through the portal of the Church. Thus the Church, being itself an icon, is lifted up in rapture to the supernatural spheres and the worshipper enters into the presence of God. In this manner, religious iconography serves a utilitarian function. Not to say a Byzantine icon cannot be aesthetically admired; for anyone can appreciate a beautifully crafted car, but to simply admire it formally is neglecting its function as a vehicle for transport. Icons then become portals whose passages are able to transcend limitations of space, time, and physical matter. I hope for my work to act as a portal into other worlds, except without the function of religious worship and veneration. I believe my creations reference unknown realities and mysterious destinations, beyond the reach of technology and human knowledge.

Inherent in my work are also formal depictions of portals. I represent all different kinds: mechanical portals, cloud portals, macrobiotic portals, celestial portals, and even organic portals that resemble bodily pores and orifices. My fascination with portals inevitably causes people to perceive my work to be sexually evocative. I cannot deny their observations. Sex is associated with fruitfulness and cyclical reproduction; anything organic must partake of this sacrament in order to thrust its species into the next generation. Sex acts as a chemical bonding agent between partners and is among the most majestic of human encounters as the intimate expression of love.

"...Christ is all and in all." — Colossians 3:11















1/2 1000 100



//Climbing Rocks: August 6th, 2008

I watched the cloud pour over the peak of the fourteen thousand foot mountain and drop into the chasm below. Curling like an upside down wave, it ascended the face of the cliff until it engulfed us. I climbed faster as trickles of water trailed down the rock, passing like people fleeing the source of something terrifying; in this case, a vertical flood of frigid rain. The temperature dropped forty degrees. Rain morphed into hail, while my fingers crimped themselves desperately to an tiny ledge of rock. I yelled for Austin to take up the slack, but my voice was lost in the deafening ruckus of nature's purging. I could hold on no longer.

Letting go of the ledge, I pushed my body away from the granite wall; the mass disappeared upward as my body matched the velocity of the falling hail. The frozen spheres hovered before me as I fell. The rope caught me in a swinging motion as I arced across the face. With instinct, I climbed up to the next piece of protection and waited on a ledge no bigger than a cereal box, while a pile of hail buried my feet. The alpine downfall made Austin invisible; every sound became lost in the unceasing repetition of ice spheres contacting my helmet. I began to pray to God, making the necessary arrangements for the parting of soul and body.

Eventually the downfall subsided, opening a window for me to complete the traverse toward Austin. After consoling one another, we humbly began our descent. The work ahead was daunting. Our violently shivering bodies made slow downward progress as we rappelled. The soggy rope was beginning to freeze, making it nearly impossible to untie. My hands had swelled to resemble boxing gloves with fingers and were unable to function according to the demands of the situation. Lightning danced around us without delay between light and sound.

We had lowered to the next set of rappel anchors when lighting struck the iron dense rock just above our heads. This happened as I was clipping into the steel bolted anchor with my metallic carabineer. Metal, flesh, and electricity united; the power coursed into my hand, and through my body. I was shocked. Austin, who was next to me, didn't feel a thing, although he recognized what had happened. The mass of the rock had absorbed much of the energy, leaving me unscathed to continue our exit strategy in the dimming day.

We made it down to a big ledge and gathered ourselves under a rock overhang where we proceeded to take our shoes off and warm eachothers feet. Only under unusual circumstances can two dudes be found giving eachother foot rubs in the wilderness, but the moment called for nothing better. Once feeling returned to our toes, we continued our descent. The sufferfest concluded five and half hours later in the darkness of the trailhead parking lot. We crawled into the car and drove into Boulder, where we consumed a pizza in silence.

This single experience has become an inspiration and a metaphor for the themes in my work: organic and feeble bodies negotiating ascension through expanses of unmoving rock while trial upon trial is thrust in opposition. Enormous scale. Forces of nature: earth, water, wind, and fire. The presence of clouds, light, and energy. Loss of clarity, vision, and strength. Undergoing suffering, exhaustion, thirst and hunger; the nearness of death. In this encounter I vividly experienced the mysterious attributes that make one consider anew the purpose of existence.

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" — Philippians 2:12















If I am expected to bring a conclusion to the labors of my explorations, it is that I have become “smitten with awe” of the Divine energies, which grip my faith so tightly that I am unable to turn my eyes elsewhere without experiencing the emptiness of life without Christ. I have tasted and seen that the Lord is good,<sup>43</sup> and can give no other account than the personal witness of my experience. My artistic explorations have increased within me a desire to pursue God and have helped me to articulate the mysteries I have uncovered in this pursuit.

During my research of the incarnation, I stumbled upon a writing that caused my adrenaline to flow because it seemed to contain and summarize, in one paragraph, the entirety of my investigations while at RISD. It is with great joy that I place the words of St. Athanasius as my parting paragraph:

“As, then, he who desires to see God Who by nature is invisible and not to be beheld, may yet perceive and know Him through His works, so too let him who does not see Christ with his understanding at least consider Him in His bodily works and test whether they be of man or God. If they be of man, then let him scoff; but if they be of God, let him not mock at things which are no fit subject for scorn, but rather let him recognize the fact and marvel that things divine have been revealed to us by such humble means, that through death deathlessness has been made known to us, and through the Incarnation of the Word the Mind whence all things proceed has been declared, and its Agent and Ordainer, the Word of God Himself. He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality. He Himself was unhurt by this, for He is impassable and incorruptible; but by His own impassability He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He thus endured. In short, such and so many are the Savior’s achievements that follow from His Incarnation, that to try to number them is like gazing at the open sea and trying to count the waves. One cannot see all the waves with one’s eyes, for when one tries to do so those that are following on baffle one’s senses. Even so, when one wants to take in all the achievements of Christ in the body, one cannot do so, even by reckoning them up, for the things that transcend one’s thought are always more than those one thinks that one has grasped. As we cannot speak adequately about even a part of His work, therefore, it will be better for

us not to speak about it as a whole. So we will mention but one thing more, and then leave the whole for you to marvel at. For, indeed, everything about it is marvelous, and wherever a man turns his gaze he sees the Godhead of the Word and is smitten with awe.”<sup>44</sup>

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”  
—Hebrews 11:1





1. On the Divine Images, ch. 8. This book was written to defend, against the iconoclasts, the use of icons for worship in the Eastern Orthodox Church during the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 AD; the defense was successful.
2. The words of David Morgan from his essay "Secret Wisdom and Self-Effacement: The Spiritual in Art in the Modern Age," in Negotiating Rapture, p. 35.
3. "Theosis" or deification, is a process of being united to God in perfect harmony.
4. On the Divine Images, ch. 11.
5. Negotiating Rapture was the title of the inaugural exhibition of the Chicago MoCA and served as the title of the exhibition catalog, which consisted of a series of essays exploring the spiritual in contemporary art.
6. The Cloud of Unknowing is an anonymous work of Christian mysticism in the latter half of the 14th Century that acts as a spiritual guide on contemplative prayer. The "cloud of unknowing" refers to the place where familiarity and knowledge are replaced by faith and love in order to attain henosis, or unity, with the Divine.
7. The Cloud of Unknowing, ch. 8.
8. During Pascha, Orthodox Christians sing: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the grave bestowing life."
9. The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, p. 87.
10. Apotheosis was a common theme in paintings during the 18th and 19th centuries; most notably are the apotheosis' of Washington, Hercules, Homer and St. Ignatius.
11. The tree of life, as mentioned in Genesis 3:24, is a prefiguration of Christ and the life giving tree upon which He was crucified.
12. The "passions" refer to the attachment of worldly things or anything that hinders spiritual growth.
13. The "nous" (Greek) is synonymous with what most people refer to as "the heart," it is the center of a person and is where true knowledge of spiritual wisdom proceeds. Matthew 6:22 refers to the nous as the "lamp of the body."
14. In The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis articulates Heaven not as a physical place where "good" people go, but rather as a direct and personal relationship with God; theosis is Heaven. Christ brought the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, thus it is through Him that we are able to directly commune with the Father, thus for the faithful Christian, Heaven is available on earth for those who seek it (see Matthew 4:17).
15. For a more thorough understanding of theosis, I would recommend Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life.
16. Periodic Tales, p. 350. This book is rich with the historical significance of white.
17. This analogy is not unlike the pearl of great price mentioned in Matthew 13:45-46.
18. The Cloud of Unknowing, ch. 6.
19. The author distinguishes two modes of being: the active life and the contemplative life. He uses Mary and Martha from Luke 10 as examples of each; Mary as the contemplative and Martha as the active. Both are good, but Mary chose the best.

20. I borrow this description of the soul from my father-in-law, Allen Moulton.
21. I believe this analogy exists beyond my own invention, but I have been unable to trace the source.. C.S. Lewis seems to be a likely candidate.
22. The judgement of naivety is well justified, especially with institutions such as the Creation Museum in Kentucky, which seeks to disprove well-established, objective knowledge regarding our planet and the species therein, while simultaneously scrambling to gather evidence to support Biblical events. A faith that needs proof is a weak faith.
23. Frieze Magazine, issue 135, Believe it or Not, p. 15.
24. It is relevant to add that the icon of the transfiguration also depicts the sandals of the disciples flying off of their feet as they tumble to the ground while covering their eyes.
25. Relational Aesthetics, p. 113.
26. Revelation 6:11.
27. Luke 9:34.
28. Daniel 10:6.
29. Revelation 14:14.
30. Matthew. 23:8
31. Exodus 16:4.
32. Revelation 3:20.
33. "A perfect worker of contemplation has no regard to any specific person for his own sake, whether kin or stranger, friend or foe; for all alike seem kin to him, and none seems a stranger. All seem his friends, and none his enemies, so that for him all those who torment him and cause him distress on earth are his particular friends, and he feels moved to desire as much good for them as he would for the closest friend he has." The Cloud of Unknowing, Ch. 24.
34. Romans 7:15.
35. John 9:5-7.
36. On the Divine Images, p. 74.
37. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Descartes and the Pineal Gland."
38. Hypothesis Concerning soul Substance, p. 241.
39. "Cogito ergo sum," Descartes famous cogito, Discourse on the Method, Part 4. It was criticized by Kierkegaard who said the appeal to the cogito is psychological rather than logical (wiki), that the existence of something cannot be proved. Philosophical Fragments, ch. 1.
40. Luke 20:38.
41. Hebrews 12:1.
42. Galatians 2:20.
43. Psalm 34:8.
44. On the Incarnation, p. 54.

13. Documentation of The Last Supper installation, photo by Jennifer Garza-Cuen, 2011
15. Documentation of somewhere in the Gulf of Alaska on august 15th, 2008
18. Documentation on the set of Real Ethereal, photo by Reinol Mesa, 2011
- 22-23. Video still from Katharsis, looping digital video, 2012
25. Cloud Study #5, ink on paper, 15x20 inches, 2012
- 26-27. The Cloud of Unknowing, ink on paper, 84x42 inches, 2012
28. Cloud Study #1, ink on paper, 15x22 inches, 2012
- 36-41. Video stills from Revelator, digital video, 4:53 minutes, 2012
- 42-43. Video still from Real Ethereal, digital video, 11:29 minutes, 2011
46. Documentation of The Last Supper, photo by Jennifer Garza-Cuen, 2011.
- 48-49. Video still from The Last Supper, digital video, 4:47 minutes, 2011
- 50-51. Documentation of The Last Supper, photo by Jennifer Garza-Cuen, 2011
- 54-63. Video still from Relationship, looping digital video, 2011
65. Documentation of the Q-tip costume, 2011
66. Documentation of the Q-tip costume, photo by Carmen Montoya, 2011
- 71-74. Documentation of Seeking the Son of Man, room installation, 2011
- 78-85. Documentation of A Modest Materialization of the Human Duality as displayed at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, 2011
- 88-89. Video still from Real Ethereal, digital video, 11:29 minutes, 2011
- 90-91. Open Options, wood, plastic, velum, and light, 22.5x30x5 inches, 2010
- 92-95. The Trinity series #1-4, wood, plastic, fur/fabric/fibers, 11x11x7 inches, 2010
97. The Holy Trintiy, 15-color screenprint, 12.25 inches (circumference), 2011
98. A Specific Existence #1, monotype and graphite on paper, 15x11 inches, 2011
99. A Specific Existence #2, monotype and graphite on paper, 15x11 inches, 2011
102. The top of pitch 4 on the "Casual Route" of Longs Peak in Colorado; photo taken by my climbing partner, Austin Badeau, at 12:05 pm on August 6th, 2008
- 104-109. Video stills from Real Ethereal, digital video, 11:29 minutes, 2011
- 112-113. Video still from Real Ethereal, digital video, 11:29 minutes, 2011

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